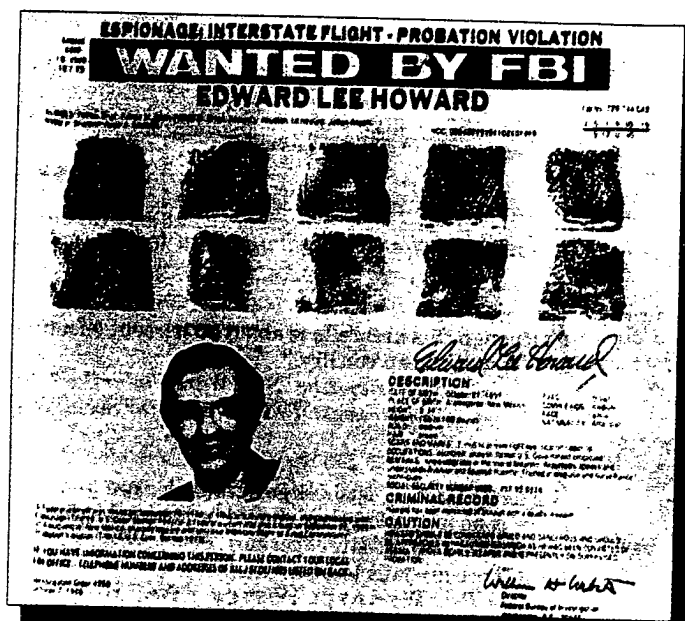


NATIONAL AFFAIRS

The Defection of a CIA Man

In a major blunder, the Company loses its first agent to Moscow—and the impact is devastating



Howard as post-office pinup: Should the CIA have recruited him? UPI-BETTMANN

The phone rang in Ken and Mary Howard's house in Garland, Texas, early one morning last week. It was Moscow on the line—and though the Howards must have been expecting this call for nearly a year, the voice echoing across the great divide seemed strangely unlike their son's. "It took me a while to recognize his voice over that telephone system," Ken Howard said. "He said, more or less, he was going to settle down and wants his family to come see him. I'm relieved to know where he's at and that he's OK." Accused spy Edward Lee Howard, 34, the only CIA man ever to defect to the Soviet Union, had finally called home—and if his parents' ordeal seemed to be over, the CIA's had hardly begun.

Plainly put, the Howard case represents one of the worst blunders in the history of the agency—and an intelligence defeat

that, in the words of one knowledgeable source, has already been "devastating" to the United States. Other spies, like John A. Walker Jr. and Ronald W. Pelton, may have caused more lasting damage by selling the secrets of U.S. snooping technology. But Howard, whose unfitness for the job seemed evident very early in his brief CIA career, is said by U.S. sources to have singlehandedly destroyed an agency spy operation inside Moscow itself. A presidential advisory board has filed a "very critical" report on the CIA's handling of the Howard case, and those involved have reportedly been disciplined. The board also criticized the FBI for letting Howard slip through its net in Santa Fe, N.M., last September. The criticism seems only fair, given the fact that it was FBI instructors, during Howard's training, who taught him how to do it. "Both the CIA and the FBI are

'Humane considerations' at the Kremlin: Yurchenko



taking a pretty hard look at themselves," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, a member of the Select Intelligence Committee. "This is a very serious matter."

The Soviets, Leahy added, are likely "to trumpet" Howard's defection "with the intent of getting other people to defect." The fanfare has clearly begun. In Moscow last week the newspaper Izvestia announced that Howard had been granted political asylum on "humane considerations"—specifically that he "has to hide from the U.S. secret services, which unboundedly persecute him." The announcement seemed to signal a propaganda barrage like the one that accompanied the double defection of KGB agent Vitaly Yurchenko last November—although it was Yurchenko, ironically enough, who finally tipped the CIA to Howard's alleged collaboration with the KGB. "They've made a whole issue of intelligence defectors to discredit our human-rights campaign," said Georgetown University Prof. Roy Godson. Meanwhile, said former CIA official George Carver, the KGB will doubtless "wring him dry" for more details on the CIA.

As sketched by NEWSWEEK's sources, the Howard case boiled down to two fundamental misjudgments by the CIA: first, the agency recruited a man who was temperamentally unsuited for a delicate espionage assignment, and second, it largely failed to appreciate the seriousness of the security risk he pre-

sented after he was fired by the agency in 1983. Howard joined the CIA in 1981 and trained with the agency's elite Soviet-affairs division for duty in Moscow. His mission: handling some of the agency's most prized "assets," Soviet citizens willing to spy on their government. Given a routine polygraph test at the end of his training, Howard reportedly was found to have been deceptive about strains in his marriage—which was crucial, since his wife, Mary, was being trained to go into the field beside him.

Ultimate revenge: The Soviet division dropped him, and an investigation allegedly showed that Howard had a drinking problem, a drug problem and on one occasion had committed a petty theft. "Profilewise, he was not the type of guy who should have been doing that job," a source said. The CIA cashiered him in 1983—but if the decision seemed prudent at the time, it seems reckless now. Howard was deeply embittered against the agency, even though it helped him get a job with the New Mexico State Legislature and paid for his psychiatric treatment. He quarreled with a CIA superior, tried suing the agency and finally took a spy's ultimate revenge—going over to the other side.

Federal affidavits lay out the espionage case against Howard: a conversation in which he admitted contemplating treason, and several trips to Europe during which, the government maintains, he sold his secrets to the KGB. Despite his trainee status, Howard knew a lot about the CIA's Moscow station—enough to compromise a top-level Soviet scientist, who is now presumed dead, and a small platoon of CIA agents in the U.S. Embassy. "The information available to Howard was absolutely devastating," a source says, "and the consequences will be devastating."

It was Yurchenko who, last fall, told the CIA that a former agent code-named "Robert" allegedly was talking to the KGB. The CIA notified the FBI, which staked out Howard's home. Howard eluded the watchers and faded away—first to Mexico and Central America, sources believe, then to Finland and the Soviet Union. His wife and son, Lee, four, remained behind. The FBI, left empty-handed, was humiliated by his disappearance—but as Carver says, "There's plenty of blame for everybody."

His phone call to Texas last week was a sign that Edward Lee Howard's life in exile has begun. "We'd like to hear from him," his father had said in an

interview late last year. "I don't know how it happened. I'd like to hear his side of it." Edward, he insisted then, "was a boy to be proud of." But he used the past tense.

TOM MORGANTHAU with RICHARD SANDZA in Washington. BARBARA BURGOWER in Houston and bureau reports

STAT

below) tipped Washington to a spy called 'Robert'

Crossing Over

Edward Lee Howard's journey to Moscow took a year and covered many miles.

